The Fourth Church Pulpit

SERVANTS AND STEWARDS

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The original message, the essential truth, of every religion is the sacred Mystery, the presence in this world of a hidden Wisdom, which cannot be expressed in words, which cannot be known in sense or reason, but is hidden in the heart — the Ground of Center or Substance of the Soul, of which the mystics speak — and reveals itself to those who seek it in the silence beyond word and thought.

Bede Griffiths
Return to the Centre

FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
John 17:1-11
1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

"Think of us ... as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries."
1 Corinthians 4:1 (NRSV)

A friend of mine, Eugenia Gamble, tells a story about learning an important lesson recently. Eugenia is a very popular speaker, much in demand these days, and spends a lot of time in airplanes and airports. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and after a recent speaking engagement in southern California, she and her husband stayed on for a glorious few days of blissful freedom. It was wonderful, restful, restorative. When they went to the airport for their return flight the ticket agent asked if they'd mind moving up to first class. They didn't mind at all. Shortly before takeoff, enjoying their spacious comfortable first class seats, they were served the best, biggest chocolate chip cookies in the world and it seemed, she said, sitting there in first class, eating a delicious cookie, holding hands with her husband, to whom she said she was still glad to be married, even after five full days together, it seemed that God was in heaven, smiling on her and all was right in her world.

After takeoff the plane, which was climbing steadily through 20,000 feet, suddenly leveled off and seemed to start a sharp descent. The captain came on the intercom and announced that there was no reason to be concerned, but there seemed to be a minor engine problem and they were going to descend a few thousand feet and check it out. Unsettling. The descent continued. Eugenia ate her second chocolate chip cookie. The pilot came on the intercom again. In fact, there was an engine problem and they were turning back to Los Angles. No reason to be concerned.

The descent continued. The captain's voice came over the intercom. In fact, the nature of the engine problem was such that it was appropriate now to find a place to land as soon as possible. No reason to be alarmed. Eugenia ate her husband's chocolate chip cookie, now entertaining visions of an emergency landing on an interstate, or somewhere in the desert or, of course, a much worse scenario.

Fortuitously the pilot found Las Vegas, landed safely, where they spent the night in a cheap motel outside of town. The next day, a nightmarish sequence of weather and mechanical complications landed them in Florida, not Birmingham, in the middle of a tornado, with very bumpy flying.

When, two days later, Eugenia was finally safely at home, she became really frightened, realizing that she had been very fortunate. Looking at herself in the mirror the first thing that morning she says she heard an inner voice and it said, "All right, Eugenia, you got a reprieve. Now what are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

There's no more important question than that. And sometimes it takes a near miss, or some experience of life's vulnerability, fragility, or just plain temporality, its agonizing brevity, to raise the issue. Successful surgery, a positive result in the lab, a harrowing flight ... a reprieve ... now what?

It is a question of management, of establishing priorities. We have this resource, our own lives: our bodies, our minds, our imaginations, our dreams and hopes, and time. Maybe a lot of time, maybe not so much, but we do have it and it is in our hands — to use, to spend, invest, or simply to observe it diminishing, dribbling away, slowly. Sometimes it takes a close call to raise the issue, but the most important question for each of us, each morning as we look in the mirror and start the day is, "what are you going to do with it, the rest of it, however much is left. You're the CEO of this project. The management is up to you."

E. B. White said somewhere — and for the life of me I can't find where (so if you know, please do let me know as well so I can say this a little more confidently) — that the good thing about having a religion is that you have something to do when you get up in the morning.

And John Updike, in an important new novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, explores the subject of what human life is without faith and therefore without something to do when you get up in the morning.

Updike traces the experience of one family in this century, through four generations, and central to the story is the gradual erosion and trivialization of any religious faith that really matters, until at the end when religion returns, literally, with a vengeance in the form of a Branch Davidian-like cult.

The story begins in 1910 as a Presbyterian minister in Patterson, New Jersey loses his faith and his purpose for being.

> "The Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot, down in the rectory of the Fourth Presbyterian Church (that got my attention!) at the corner of Straight Street and Broadway, felt the last particles of faith leave him. The sensation was distinct — a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward." [p. 5]

The Reverend Wilmot goes through the motions of ministry for a while, but eventually demits his ordination, never again finds anything important to do, tries to sell encyclopedias door-to-door, and slowly diminishes, spiritually, emotionally, as well as physically.

Updike allows the reader to come to his or her own conclusions, but the novel does seem like a literary sermon on the topic of faith and life, responsible management of the resource, living purposefully and meaningfully out of some deep faith commitment, or, as St. Paul put it once:

> "Think of us ... as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

Paul had a number of reprieves, a number of occasions to ask and answer the question about what to do with the remainder of his life. He doesn't share much of his internal theological struggle, but he does let his readers know how he intends to live, namely, as a servant and a steward.

Paul is writing to the early church in Corinth and because the church is badly divided, some giving their loyalty to him, others devoted to Peter, still others are followers of a preacher named Apollos, Paul's response is to level the playing field: We're not leaders of factions. I'm not primarily an ecclesiastical official, a spokesperson for a particular theological school. I'm not a liberal, conservative or moderate. I'm a "servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God." I'm a responsible manager of my own life and of the faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the mysteries of God. [1 Corinthians 4:1]

It is an important image and an important concept for Christians: Stewardship as responsible management. Responsible management as a way to be faithful, to be "religious," a way to express the mysteries of God and our trust in Jesus Christ.

Now, when the preacher starts talking about stewardship, the people assume that the real topic is money and sometimes it is, mostly it is. We are learning to be more honest and straight-forward about the reality that how we use money is a way to express our deepest values and convictions. And we are learning to say with clarity that the institutional church lives its life and does its mission in a culture and an economy which requires money. But, mostly stewardship as money talk comes in the fall when churches all over the world are thinking about next year's budget.

Stewardship in May, with no finance campaign in sight, is about life: stewardship in its earliest and original meaning of exercising responsibility, managing wisely, taking care of business, starting with one's own life.

Theologian Douglas John Hall wrote a good book on the subject once, *The Steward: A Biblical Image Come of Age*, without once talking about money. What stewardship is about, Hall says, is living your life in a way that is accountable to the one who gave it to you: a way of profound gratitude and of intentional responsibility.

Christians have not always thought this way. Typically Christianity, from the middle ages right up to the 1990s, has defined the vocation of a Christian to be the sanctification of the individual in preparation for spending eternity in heaven. Professor Hall, in his most recent work, *Professing the Faith*, identifies and laments the fact that Protestant theology insists on "reducing" the message of Christianity to salvation of the soul after death, or more recently, and more fashionably, the happiness, contentment, self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-expression of the soul in the present. Protestant theology has either sanctified or psychologized the gospel, when the truth of the matter is that the message has to do with being responsible for the world, beginning with your own life.

It's a matter of life and death, Hall thinks. The life of the world just may depend on faithful people bearing witness, doing the works of compassion, protecting life. Individually, it's a matter of deciding to live faithfully, to contend for the forces of life, beauty, goodness and truth, says Hall, or capitulating to the forces of death, retreating to physical or spiritual enclaves, safely insulated from everything in the world that denies life, goodness and beauty.

There's a lot of that going on in the world these days. We live in a very violent culture. The power of death is not a metaphor, a harmless theological concept. The power of death is whatever denies life and beauty and goodness. It is a teenager with a handgun. It is extensive, carefully organized gangs, based on and financed by the free market principles of supply and demand, supported by our continuing collaboration with that market by assuring scarcity and therefore the highest street value of the product of choice — crack cocaine. The power of death is a system that arranges all that, and then crowds as many poor and unemployed people as it can into high rise buildings, takes away all the incentives it can think of for encouraging families to stay together, slowly withdraws public support for life's necessities and then happily provides access to military style weapons, armor piercing bullets, called "cop killers," and when the subject is finally addressed by public officials, like last week by the President, it is in the form of proposals not to deal with the problem at all, but to get tougher and build more jails. That system is what the power of death looks like in America, in Chicago, in 1996.

And Christians, Douglas John Hall suggests, cannot and must not follow the culture in retreating from the harsh, almost unspeakable reality of that. But in the name of Jesus Christ, not anybody's political or social agenda, in the name of responsible stewardship, Christians must continue, with dogged persistence, to ask hard questions, tell hard truths, and be willing as necessary to act responsibly.

It doesn't' seem like very much in the context of an enormous reality like urban poverty and violence, but the Church of Jesus Christ sometimes keeps trying, sometimes long after everyone else has capitulated. It is what this church tries to do with its educational outreach programs, tutoring, the Center for Whole Life at Cabrini-Green.

Corporately as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysterious presence and, individually, my sense is that you and I need the word of responsibility, the stewardship word, as much and as deeply as we need anything.

My conclusion after doing this job for three decades is that people turn to religion for two reasons: to figure out who they are and to decide what to do.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that we are, first, children of God, loved by God as strongly as a mother loves her nursing infant, loved by God beyond our ability to imagine or comprehend, loved with an everlasting, unconditional love.

That is who we are. God's beloveds. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that precisely because we are loved, God has work for us to do, expects us to be responsible managers, depends on us to live out our lives, spend the precious resource of our lives — to God's glory and for the world's care.

Servants and stewards. Do you know Oseola McCarty? She was in the news last summer actually. Eighty-seven years old, she has lived in Hattiesburg, Mississippi all her life, quit school in sixth grade, took in dirty clothes, washed, ironed and repaired every day, all her life. She never travelled much, took one trip to Niagara Falls, never spent money on herself, faithfully attended the Friendship Baptist Church, put every dollar and all the change she made in the bank. And last summer, after discovering that she had $150,000, gave it all — every penny to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships for black students. "I never minded work, but I was always so busy, busy. Maybe I can make it so the children don't have to work like I did." [*New York Times*, 8/10/95]

Well - that's it, isn't it? Faithful living is a matter of service and stewardship: helping others and managing one's own resources, one's life, responsibility. And shining through it all is the mystery of the God who created us and gave us life and calls us to manage creation, beginning with our own lives. And although I appreciate Miss McCarty's wanting to spare the recipients of her scholarship the hard work she did, my sense is that once they graduate because of her generosity, her service, the most valuable gift she will have given them is precisely the example of hard work, that stewardship, that wise and responsible management of her own life.

We have been given all we have, all is gift: life and love, dear ones, our children, this day — this life of ours. All of it, not of our making, not our creation: all of it, and God's love as well, a gift. "Think of us — you/me — in this way," St. Paul wrote, "as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." Amen.